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ABSTRACT

Foreign language teachers should become familiar and comfortable with computers. Learning about computers and their applications to the foreign language instructional process will provide teachers with the information needed to examine issues related to the new technology and stimulate discussion of its implementation in the school. All educators should be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of computer-assisted instruction (CAI). Many computer literacy courses give teachers general knowledge of how computers work, familiarity with terminology, an idea of significant events in the history of computers, and the ability to read and write simple programs. While programming knowledge is not essential to the teacher, it is helpful. CAI is of obvious use in testing and record-keeping, but can also aid in conducting tutorials, freeing valuable teacher time. In 1982, The University of the District of Columbia foreign language department established a computer committee and began a CAI training course for faculty. The course eliminated all but the essentials of a computer literacy course, in order to stimulate faculty use of computers. Responses to a committee-member designed questionnaire indicated faculty concerns about computer use. The real value of the computer to the foreign language learner lies in the use made of it by the teacher. (MSE)

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GETTING STARTED:

The Foreign Language Teacher and Computer-Assisted Instruction

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Getting Started:

The Foreign Language Teacher and Computer-Assisted Instruction

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Today's interest in computers is affecting the lives of us all. Not only are we hearing more about the new technology from community and business leaders, but parents of the students we teach are encouraging the use of the electronic machines in our schools. Even in instances where budgets have been streamlined, many youngsters are bringing their personal computers from home into the classroom, as students in the physics classes at a local high school in Washington, D.C. recently did. In a Washington, D.C. elementary school, parents, school administrators, and teachers banded together to reorganize a complex of six schools in the city in order to get help for students immediately. The outcome of that group's work was a three-year plan reflecting a new curriculum designed to provide computer assisted instruction (CAI) in math, science and foreign languages.

As more and more young people graduate from high schools with good computer skills, such activity at the elementary and secondary levels has prompted many educators at the university level across the country to take a closer look at the impact computer technology is having on higher education. This is certainly the case at the University of the District of Columbia (UDC).

The following article, discusses why teachers should learn more about computers, how departments can prepare teachers to implement CAI, and the ways that computers can be used in the instructional process. The author underscores potential problem areas and relates the experiences of one foreign language department that is responding to the new technological era. The paper also suggests ways schools or universities may meet the challenge. To discuss fully the many issues surrounding computer assisted instruction (CAI) in American schools would be impossible within the scope of this paper. What can be done is to emphasize that foreign language teachers, along with educators in other disciplines are living in exciting

times: the youth we teach today represent the new computer generation. As young people become familiar with computers, many educators are taking notice and beginning to reassess conventional programs. The almost daily advances in high technology increasingly allow the microcomputers to become a form of standard equipment as common as television in many homes. These developments place an even greater responsibility upon today's teachers and the educational system to incorporate computers into the curriculum.

As responsible educators, foreign language teachers should become familiar and comfortable with computers if they have not already done so. In fact, if events in American society follow their present course, without too much variation, it can be safely assumed that high technology will have a great impact upon the lives of all of the citizens of our country within the next ten years. Since a major role of the foreign language teacher is to constantly seek out methods to improve instruction, teachers owe it to themselves, the profession, and the young people in their communities, to make the most intelligent choices possible when confronted with major educational changes like the introduction of computers. Knowledge about the new technology is especially important for educators in view of the recent Carnegie Report¹ on American schools, which seriously questions whether or not computers, as they are presently used, belong in the school's curriculum at all.

Learning about computers and their applications to the foreign language instructional process will help give teachers the kind of information needed to examine issues related to the new technology. More importantly, informed educators can stimulate discussion leading toward the discovery of answers needed to solve problems related to computer implementation in the school. Open, frank talks of this kind can also ease the tension for those teachers who feel intimidated by computers, especially those who see a threat to their jobs. The fear of job loss, as it relates to computers, however, has not been a major problem at UDC. In fact, as more computers come into use, more teachers who are able to use them will be needed.

All educators, then, must be mindful of the advantages and disadvantages of CAI. As planners prepare CAI training programs, they confront a more immediate problem. There appears to be no consensus on the definition of the term "computer literacy" among experts in the field. Computer literacy means different things to different people. For example, Webster's idea of literate refers to being able to read and write. However, the computer is a machine, not something educated, well read or possessing

¹Ernest L. Boyer, *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

any skills of reading or writing.² As a result of this ambiguity, some computer experts argue that teachers cannot be expected to meet the challenge of CAI when the parameters of the challenge are yet to be fully defined.³ What then, does a computer literacy course usually contain and how can teachers in schools begin to use computers in the instructional phase of their work?

The answer to the first question can be summarized as follows: many computer literacy courses seek to give teachers general knowledge of how computers work, familiarity with terminology related to the machine, an idea of significant events in the history of computers, and the ability to read and write simple programs. Not everyone needs to know how to program; however, if teachers can simply use the computer, they will be able to take advantage of the many types of courseware (software) available on the market. As a word of caution, however, it is well to remember that courseware is not yet keeping pace with the latest models of computers (hardware) on the market. As a result, those teachers who want teaching material specifically designed to meet the needs of a particular class will find a knowledge of programming very beneficial. Moreover, knowing how to program provides the teacher with additional insight into the capabilities of computers and their numerous applications to particular disciplines.

While CAI is of obvious use in testing and record-keeping, it can also aid in conducting tutorials. The computer can free up valuable teacher time and put it to better use. For example, the once-dreaded and time consuming task of student-to-teacher drill and practice is now being assigned to the computer. With the aid of the computer, students can work on problem areas in the Compulab (computer laboratory) before or after class. Whether or not a particular student is quick or slow in learning foreign languages matters little, since the computer can adjust the pace of instruction to match the learning ability of the individual. In the process, the privacy of each student is also protected. Perhaps one of the greatest benefits a computer has over the classroom teacher is that, as machines, computers are tireless and provide immediate feedback. Yet, machines break down and need repair. On the other hand, teachers have an advantage over the new technology in being able to provide the kind of "live" classroom environment that nourishes students, helping them experience what being human is. As educators plan CAI training programs and design tasks to develop the higher kind of reasoning powers associated with foreign language training,

²"Computer literacy? Who is going to define it? What is it? Where do you find it? When do you know you have it? Why do you need it?" Editorial, *Closing the Gap*, (June-July, 1983), p.4.

³*Ibid.*

they must make certain to retain the important and enriching experiences gained through human association in the classroom setting.

In 1982, a few members of the foreign language department at UDC organized a computer committee and began a CAI training course for its members. The leader of the computer committee, a colleague specializing in linguistics, had developed computerized instructional materials during a recent sabbatical. However, if an experienced person is not available at your school, don't despair. Continue to look around. Help is bound to be available, especially in the math department.

The committee decided to use a direct approach to CAI training by eliminating all but the essentials of the computer literacy course in order to get faculty to start using computers. Material related to significant events in the history of computers was thrown out and difficult terminology reduced to a minimum. During the initial planning stages for the CAI training course, each member of the group received an assignment. One teacher who was completely unfamiliar with computers, volunteered to go to the Library of Congress and learn how to use the computers there in order to compile a bibliography geared to the interests and needs of the foreign language department. In the process, this instructor discovered that software was available for beginning courses in German, French and Spanish.

Another committee member developed a questionnaire designed to capture the faculty's reactions to the entire idea of CAI implementation into the foreign language curriculum as well as the instructors' knowledge about computers in general. Response to the questionnaire was varied. A few members did not return the form, and some felt they lacked the experience necessary to respond to any questionnaire concerning computers. Other faculty respondents, however, welcomed the chance to write down their initial concerns early in the planning stages, so that important issues could be addressed over the course of the training sessions. Whether or not your committee chooses to adopt the questionnaire method, it is advisable to keep the lines of communication open among faculty participants at all times. Input provided by senior faculty often proves invaluable since it is based on many years of teaching experience. When all the information gathered from questionnaires and other sources is recorded, stored, and re-examined periodically, it becomes good reference material for assessing the strengths and weaknesses in your department as you upgrade your computer program.

Once the computer committee completed the groundwork for the CAI training sessions, the first lesson in a series of three two-hour sessions began. From the beginning of the first lesson faculty found themselves placed in the role of students as in the opening weeks of a given semester. Instructors learned how to turn the computer on and off, wipe out a mistake,

and call up selected programmed exercises related to the text. Subsequent lessons addressed word processing skills and methods for setting up course term files. The first series of lessons met with much success and satisfaction on the part of faculty. In future lessons, department participants will begin writing simple programs using Gnosis as a convenient programming language. With Gnosis, most of the programming has already been done for users, so that all an instructor really has to do is put in data in a number of teaching frames.⁴ From here teachers may go on to learn other programming languages, like BASIC. Although Gnosis as a programming language is not readily transferable from a large mainframe computer to a small micro-computer, it is useful for teachers because it can be learned in about two or three hours.

As computers continue to change the lives of individuals everywhere, the responsibility of bringing computer literacy to America's youth becomes heavier. In spite of the problems associated with the new technological era, CAI may hold promise for the foreign language profession. Current research suggests that computers can help students learn some foreign language material faster, this is especially true in the area of the tutorial. The computer as a tool for teaching writing skills in foreign languages also appears to be rewarding. Whether or not these benefits imply that all children in American schools should use computers everyday as part of foreign language study is another matter.

Exactly what then, if anything at all, is the value of CAI to the foreign language learner? This is where you, the individual teacher, come into the picture. Good teachers realize that doing a job well begins by using common sense. The computer's potential to change the entire course of American education seems reason enough to start the process of learning about them. We may all do well to remember the words of contemporary educator and computer expert David Ahl "... it may be better to get started learning more about computers rather than be left waiting for others to make things happen for us (the profession), or observe what is happening to us (the profession) or still worse, be left wondering what happened."⁵

⁴Robert Brown, "Foreign Languages and CAI," University of the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C., 1981.

⁵David Ahl, "State of the Art in Computer Education", Opening Address, National Educational Computing Conference, Baltimore, (June, 1983).